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# The Emergence of Abandoned Paddy Fields in Negeri Sembilan, Malaysia

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## The Emergence of Abandoned Paddy Fields in Negeri Sembilan, Malaysia

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### Introduction

William Maxwell, a well-known colonial civil servant of British Malaya, wrote about the Negeri Sembilan Malays of the 1880s in the following way:

A purely agricultural life requires that the cultivator be satisfied with poor fare and that his style of living be simple, modest and economical. As satisfying these conditions the Malays of Negri Sembilan are an almost an ideal peasantry [sic]. Their methods of [rice] cultivation are excellent, they preserve their ancient habits and traditions and they are satisfied with little. [quoted in AR KP 1912: 4]<sup>1)</sup>

Martin Lister, first British Superintendent of Negeri Sembilan, reported in 1888:

The registration of gardens and paddy fields at so early a stage in the [colonial] administration of these States [districts of Negeri Sembilan] is a matter for congratulation, as both in Johol and Tampin, lands formerly abandoned have received immediate attention on the part of the owners, in consequence of this light taxation and of a feeling of shame on the part of the owners to ignore the property which has descended to them from their ancestors. [Lister 1888: 1365–1366]

The District Officer of Kuala Pilah, Negeri Sembilan, noted in 1912:

Still the Kuala Pilah Malay lives in a style, simple, modest and economical; . . . The men have no scope to become fishermen; little scope and no inclination to work for wages; they are padi planters first, secondly cultivators of kampong [garden] and beyond that nothing, unless one except a very few special callings such as *lembaga* [clan head], *pawang* [village magician], *kathi* [Islamic official], goldsmith, bullock-carter and so on. [AR KP 1912: 4–5]

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1) Negri Sembilan is an old spelling of Negeri Sembilan. Concerning the meaning of abbreviations for archival materials, see "Bibliography" at the end of the paper.

The Negeri Sembilan Administration Report for the year 1917 announced its confidence in the Malay commitment to rice cultivation despite the expansion of rubber cultivation in the state.

Padi planting has for generations been the chief industry of Negeri Sembilan Malays and (except of late years in the Seremban and Coast Districts) the quantity harvested has always, at any rate in normal years, been sufficient for the settled population. The craze for rubber planting among the Malays certainly led to some falling off in the production, but the process never went very far and the fall in the price of rubber last year and the increase in the price of rice has done much to counteract the tendency to neglect the rice fields. [NS AR 1917: 5]

Mohamad Yusoff, born in the Alor Gajah area in 1912, reminisces about his childhood in his native village and states in his memoir: "The Minangkabau [in Negeri Sembilan and surrounding areas] were well-known for their love of padi lands which to them meant wealth and prosperity" [Mohamad Yusoff 1983: 3]. Charleton N. Maxwell, a member of the 1930 Rice Cultivation Committee, was of the opinion that "the people [Malays of Negeri Sembilan] were attached to rice planting and in many areas, would continue to plant rice despite counter attractions [such as rubber cultivation]" [*Report of the Rice Cultivation Committee Volume II* 1931: 61].

More recent commentators hold that rice planting in Negeri Sembilan was "hallowed by tradition" [Gullick 1951], and supported by "the moral value of rice cultivation" [Swift 1965], "the ideology of rice" [Lewis 1976] and "the high moral valuation of padi growing" [Peletz 1988].

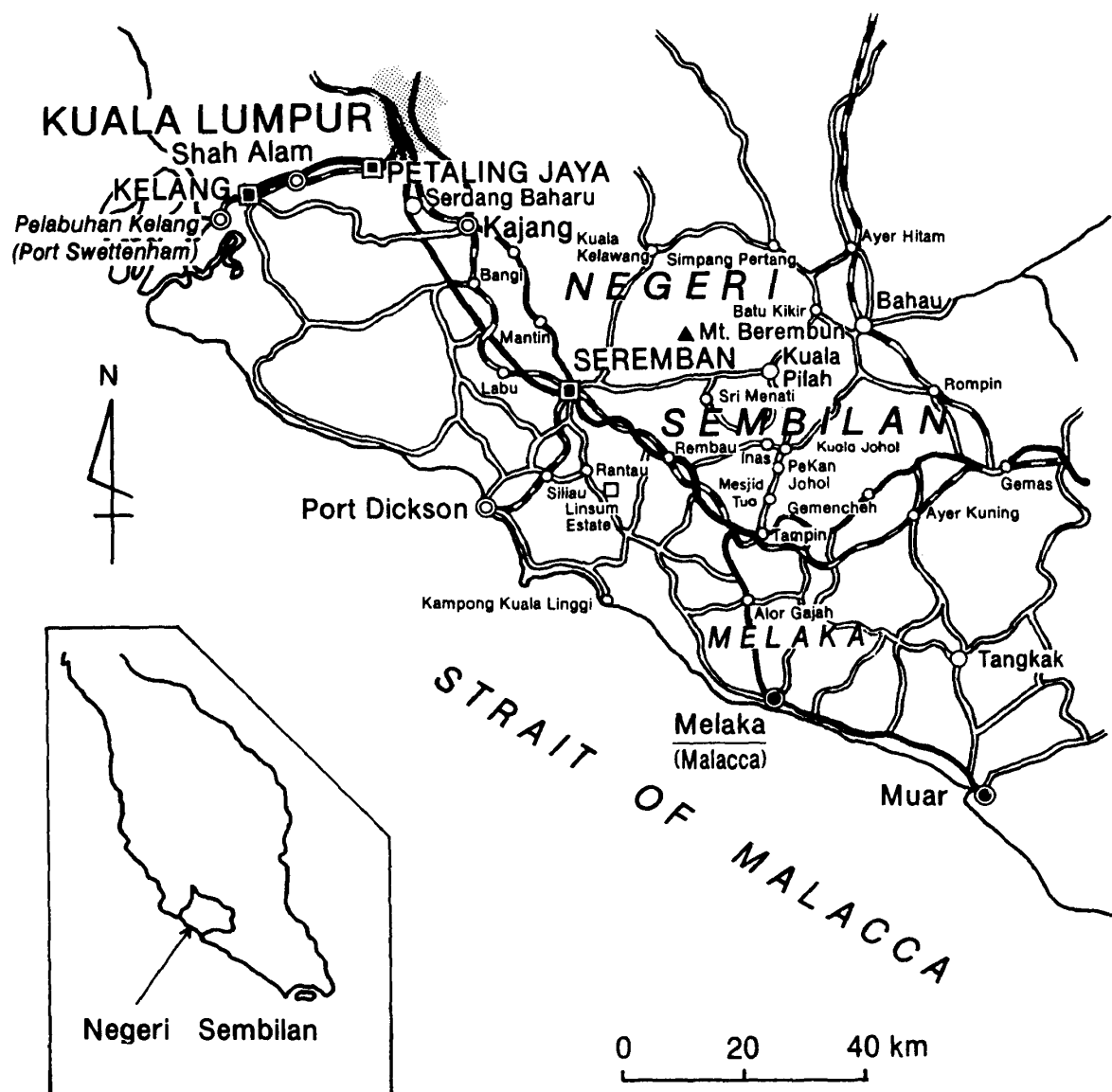
How different these observations are from the present situation! As recently as 1970, 87 percent of the total gazetted *sawah* (paddy fields) in Negeri Sembilan were actually planted with rice in the main-season; but the figure dropped to 51 percent in 1975 and to 16 percent in 1980. The figure registered a modest recovery to 21 percent in 1985, but the rate of sawah cultivation plunged to a mere 7 percent in 1990. All the indications are that there will be no substantial recovery of peasant rice cultivation in Negeri Sembilan in the future. In fact, it is my strong impression that the younger generation of Negeri Sembilan Malays are by and large not interested in agriculture.<sup>2)</sup>

It is the purpose of this paper to document the rise and fall of rice cultivation in Negeri Sembilan of Peninsular Malaysia (Map 1) and to ascertain some of the factors accounting for its present demise. I mainly resort to macro statistics in this endeavour.

I have previously written two papers related to rice cultivation in the state of Negeri Sembilan which draw largely on materials from my case study in Inas in the district of Kuala Pilah [Kato 1988;

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2) The total gazetted sawah in Negeri Sembilan is 36,456 acres [Nyanen Thiran 1981: 6]. It is not clear when this figure was first registered but the source I consulted mentions it in relation to statistics of 1978. The above calculations of sawah cultivation rates are based on statistics from *Lapuran Tahunan* of Pejabat Pertanian Negeri Sembilan (the Annual Report of the Department of Agriculture of Negeri Sembilan) for appropriate years. The figures refer only to the main-season rice cultivation and exclude the off-season rice cultivation. Double cropping, which became popular in Negeri Sembilan in the late 1960s, ceased to be significant after 1975.



Map 1 Negeri Sembilan and Surrounding Areas (ca. 1988)

1991].<sup>3)</sup> Let me briefly recapitulate two salient points in my previous papers in connection with the demise of rice cultivation. Firstly, I argued that the disappearance of community-wide agricultural rituals indicates that rice cultivation in Negeri Sembilan began to lose its cultural significance from the beginning of this century. This process was accompanied by the introduction of cultivated rubber,

3) The research for these two papers as well as the present one was carried out within the framework of a larger research project titled "Socio-Economic Change and Cultural Transformation in Rural Malaysia." It was carried out between 1987 and 1989 under the sponsorship of JSPS (the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science) and VCC (the Vice Chancellors' Council of National Universities of Malaysia) and funded by the Hitachi Scholarship Foundation. The project was coordinated by Shamsul Amri Baharuddin of Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia and myself. After the termination of the project, I continued to carry out research in Inas and Negeri Sembilan with the funding of the Japanese Ministry of Education, Science and Culture.

the single most important cash crop in Negeri Sembilan during the colonial period. Secondly, the spread of rubber cultivation eventually accentuated the division of labour between men and women: rubber cultivation and tapping for men and rice cultivation for women. The decline of rice cultivation basically meant that women became, or could afford to become, more and more dissociated from rice cultivation.

In this paper, I try to discern notable trends in sawah cultivation by examining annual statistics on the acreage of cultivated sawah areas for the entire state. Fortunately, I was able to secure sawah cultivation statistics covering most of the twentieth century up to 1990. Eventually I hope to combine the present macro perspective with that of a case study in my attempt to understand the process of social change in rural Negeri Sembilan, one significant manifestation of which is the dramatic decline of rice cultivation.

## I Development of Sawah Cultivation in Negeri Sembilan

It is generally believed that rice cultivation in Peninsular Malaysia started earlier in history in the northern regions, for example, Kedah, than in the southern regions. Other than the more favourable ecological and climatic conditions for rice cultivation in the northern regions, this is partly attributed to influences originating from well-established rice-cultivating societies further north, that is, the southern part of present-day Thailand.

According to Malay tradition, rice cultivation was first introduced into Kedah and the neighbouring Malay States in the north of the Peninsula by the Siamese probably at some time during the 15th century. [*Report of the Rice Cultivation Committee Volume I* 1931: 15]<sup>4)</sup>

Among the southern regions, it is undoubtedly Negeri Sembilan where a sophisticated type of rice cultivation was first established. Negeri Sembilan was settled from around 1,400 mainly by Minangkabau colonizers from central Sumatra in present Indonesia; and they were known for their relatively well-developed rice cultivation techniques among the largely slash-and-burn cultivators of Sumatra. Thus, Hill states:

Nevertheless, by the early sixteenth century several rice-growing traditions may be dimly discerned [in Peninsular Malaysia]. The most recent and most skilled was that of the migrant Minangkabau [in Negeri Sembilan], growers of rice in hillside dry fields, in valley-floor fields flooded by water entrapped on the surface, in fields irrigated by water-wheel on the river-terraces. [Hill 1977: 27]

Despite their attachment to rice planting and the reputed sophistication of their agricultural

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4) However, Hill speculates that rice cultivation in the northern regions was possibly Mon rather than Siamese or Thai origin and, if so, the timing of its early development might be pushed back as early as to the sixth century [Hill 1977: 176].

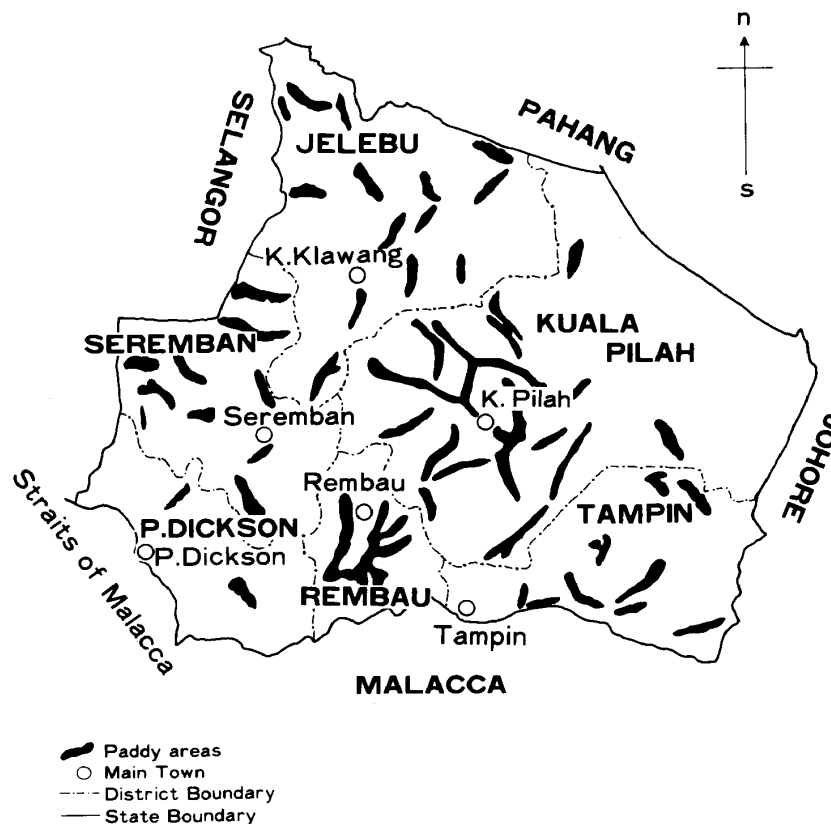
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techniques, the Malays of Negeri Sembilan face serious ecological and climatic limitations in the expansion of paddy fields. Inland Negeri Sembilan, where early settlements were established, consists of narrow valleys and low ridges. Minangkabau colonizers generally settled at the lower parts of valleys. They established their houses on the natural levees along rivers or at the foot of hills and opened sawah at the valley floors. The strip-shaped distribution pattern of sawah in Negeri Sembilan clearly shows such a settlement formation (Maps 2 & 3). In addition to rice cultivation, they carried out various agricultural activities on the hill slopes [Gullick 1951: 40]. Referring to the land use patterns in Negeri Sembilan in the 1870s, Hill has the following to say:

Inland [of Negeri Sembilan], the valley floors were devoted to wet rice cultivation, in many instances under irrigation, and to the grazing of livestock, including buffaloes and goats.



Map 2 Paddy Fields in Negeri Sembilan in the 19th Century  
Source: Hill [1977: Figure 13]



**Map 3** Paddy Fields in Contemporary Negeri Sembilan (ca. 1981)  
Source: Nyanen Thiran [1981: 103]

Permanently wet tracts were commonly planted with sago. The lower slopes of the hills were devoted to orchards, including coconut and areca. Beyond these, the slopes were occupied by ladangs [dry fields] in which a wide range of crops was cultivated; hill rice, tobacco, sugar, coffee, pepper, “chocolate” and maize. [Hill 1977: 130]

The ecological niche of narrow valleys hampered the sort of substantial geographical expansion of sawah that was common in the plains of Peninsular Malaysia in the later colonial period. Thus, Martin Lister already noted in 1888:

The paddy fields in these States [districts of Negeri Sembilan] are very extensive, and although rice is not exported and never can be, as available land is insufficient, yet the supply of rice is sufficient, in good years, to provide for the wants of the inhabitants, and new lands are being opened in order to provide for an increasing Native population. It can never be expected that rice should be exported from mountainous countries; it is only from great estuaries such as that of the Perak and other rivers on the west coast that rice can ever become an article of commerce. [Lister 1888: 1365]

Another limitation of rice cultivation in Negeri Sembilan was a relative lack of rainfall. The

average annual rainfall in Negeri Sembilan, 65 to 80 inches, was less than that in other major rice-planting regions in the peninsula. This problem might have been overcome with the construction of irrigation facilities; but the British were reluctant to make such an investment in mountainous regions [Hill 1977: 127, 128–129].

The availability of non-agricultural as well as agricultural pursuits other than rice cultivation was another factor which might have discouraged the expansion of sawah in Negeri Sembilan. Hill continues after the passage quoted above:

Even streams bore their share of produce, being dammed up to form fish ponds from which periodic fish-drives brought large sums in addition to a constant supply of food. But it was from the sale of buffaloes, goats and poultry that most of the cash income was derived. Agriculture was supplemented by the collection of jungle produce, including damar (a resin), gutta, gum benzoin, *kayu gharu* [incense woods] and rattan which were exported by river to Kuala Muar and by road to Malacca and Sungai Ujong. On the whole, standards of [rice] cultivation among the Minangkabau [in Negeri Sembilan] were superior to those of Malacca, a fact attested to by numerous observers, and each family had a wide range of sources of income. [*ibid.* : 130]<sup>5)</sup>

Given the diversity of economic pursuits existent in Negeri Sembilan, population pressure on sawah was probably partly alleviated by the intensification of other activities than the expansion of rice fields.

The British extended their colonial domination to the whole of Negeri Sembilan in 1887. It is difficult to obtain statistics on sawah acreage in the early years of colonial rule. In 1891 the total sawah area in Negeri Sembilan was estimated to be 19,423 acres [*ibid.* : 127]; but the accuracy of this figure is in doubt, for no assessment of the sawah acreage in Negeri Sembilan was made before 1897, the year when land registration, later to be commonly called Mukim Register, was enacted in the Federated Malay States (for more details on the Mukim Register, see Kato [1991: 117–120]).

Fortunately, we have more reliable figures on sawah acreage after the early 1900s. Table 1 indicates the total cultivated sawah areas, not the gazetted sawah areas, for the main-season crop from 1903 to 1959. The figures in the right-hand column show the cultivation rates as a percentage of the total gazetted sawah areas in Negeri Sembilan.<sup>6)</sup>

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5) References and footnotes included in the original text are omitted in this and previous quotations from the same source.

6) We can assume that the acreage figures here mostly refer to sawah since shifting cultivation was penalized by the British authorities from around the turn of the century. The cultivation rates were calculated as a percentage of the 36,456 acres of total gazetted sawah areas in Negeri Sembilan. As already mentioned, it is not clear when this figure was first registered. Judging from the fact that over 33,000 acres of sawah were actually cultivated in 1909, it was probably already registered in the early twentieth century. The figure of 36,456 acres is used as a baseline in calculating the cultivation rates of sawah in Negeri Sembilan throughout this paper. Cultivation rates should in any case be construed as rough measures, not as precise indicators.



Table 1 Rice Cultivation in Negeri Sembilan, 1903–1959 (in acres)

Year	Cultivated Acreage	Cultivation Rate
1903	31,120	85.4%
1906	32,475	89.1%
1909	33,954	93.1%
1911	17,440	47.8%
1912	28,000	76.8%
1913	32,000	87.7%
1914	28,000	76.8%
1915	28,570	78.4%
1916	31,507	86.4%
1917	26,400	72.4%
1929	33,187	91.0%
1930	32,416	88.9%
1931	32,626	89.5%
1932	34,319	94.1%
1933	34,617	95.0%
1934	34,364	94.3%
1936	33,890	93.0%
1937	34,390	94.3%
1938	33,630	92.2%
1939	34,730	95.3%
1941	32,700	89.7%
1946	29,612	81.2%
1947	33,283	91.3%
1948	34,303	94.1%
1949	34,047	93.4%
1953	28,560	78.3%
1954	30,490	83.6%
1955	30,900	84.8%
1956	31,710	87.0%
1957	31,260	85.7%
1958	31,000	85.0%
1959	30,300	83.1%

Sources: Peletz [1988: 140], NS AR [1911: ix; 1912: 7; 1913: 9; 1914: 9; 1916: 6; 1917: 3; 1929: 15], AR NS [1931: x; 1932: x; 1933: x; 1934: 9; 1937: 12–13; 1939: 4–5; 1949: 13], Burnett [1949: Appendices E & F], *Report of the Rice Cultivation Committee Volume II* [1931: 1], *Federation of Malaya Rice Supplement 1959* [1959: Table 4]

There are a few noteworthy trends in the table. First, the available (i.e., gazetted) sawah was rarely cultivated up to its full capacity. Moreover, with the exception of the period 1911–1917, very little variation is observed in the cultivated areas of sawah in Negeri Sembilan in the 56 years from 1903 to 1959. This is truly surprising since the population of Negeri Sembilan multiplied

substantially during the same period due to natural increase and the inflow of migrants, namely, Chinese, Indians, and Indonesians. Between 1901 and 1957, the population of Negeri Sembilan multiplied almost fourfold, from 96,028 to 364,524. The Malay component of the population alone, more or less the sole rice-cultivating group in the state, increased from 55,540 to 149,095 during the same period [Peletz 1988: 132].<sup>7)</sup>

Due to population increase, Negeri Sembilan, which had probably been exporting surplus rice to nearby Malacca in the latter half of the nineteenth century, ceased to be self-sufficient in rice from the early twentieth century.

In the first decade of the twentieth century, not a single report of expansion of the cultivated [sawah] area appeared [in Negeri Sembilan]. At the same time the Malay populace which had formerly been self-sufficient in rice, with some exportable surplus, was no longer self-supporting and by 1908 only 70 per cent of the total Malay rice needs were filled locally. [Hill 1977: 127]<sup>8)</sup>

Clearly the process of agricultural involution, that is, the labour-intensification of rice cultivation geared for increased productivity in lieu of areal expansion [Geertz 1968], did not take place in Negeri Sembilan.

The mystery of why, in the face of population pressure, available sawah was not fully cultivated and new sawah was not opened is further confounded by a substantial decline in the cultivation rates of sawah during the period 1911–1917. It is important here to realize that the phenomenon of *sawah terbiar* or uncultivated sawah, a serious “problem” in contemporary Negeri Sembilan, was already known in the early twentieth century. In 1911, for example, less than half of the gazetted sawah was actually cultivated (Table 1).<sup>9)</sup>

One of the reasons for the early emergence of sawah terbiar in Negeri Sembilan was undoubtedly the spread of rubber cultivation. Rubber cultivation siphoned off labour from rice cultivation and, at the same time, eventually provided cash income for the purchase of rice. Table 2 indicates the development of rubber cultivation, inclusive of estates and smallholdings, in Negeri Sembilan before World War Two. The first decade of the 1900s witnessed a spurt of rubber cultivation in the estate sector in the peninsula. The mushrooming of estates and the rise of rubber prices soon lured many Malay peasants into rubber cultivation. In Negeri Sembilan the size of rubber cultivation jumped from 40,883 acres to 189,409 acres between 1909 and 1911. A substantial portion of this tremendous increase was due to the expansion of rubber smallholdings.<sup>10)</sup>

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7) Indonesian migrants (e.g., Sumatrans and Javanese) are included in the Malays in this classification.

8) The Malay population in Negeri Sembilan increased from 46,069 to 68,052 between 1891 and 1911 [Peletz 1988: 132].

9) In the previously quoted passage, Martin Lister also pointed out the existence of abandoned lands in Johol and Tampin in 1888. Abandonment in this case was most probably caused by the expansion of Chinese cassava plantations and resultant demand for Malay labour [Lister 1888: 1365–1366].

10) One can see this by comparing the figures for 1909 and 1911 with that for 1912 in Table 2; the latter refers only to estates exceeding one hundred acres in size.

**Table 2** Expansion of Rubber Acreage in pre-1940 Negeri Sembilan (in acres)

Year	Rubber Acreage
1903	6,188
1906	15,103
1909	40,883
1911	189,409
1912	78,564*
1915	109,723*
1917	220,000
1918	165,199*
1929	341,848
1939	396,065

Sources: Peletz [1988: 140], NS AR [1911: 4, ix; 1917: 3; 1929: 15], AR NS [1939: 4]

Note: The figures with asterisks pertain to estates exceeding one hundred acres in size.

According to the Negri Sembilan Administration Report for 1911, there was a “steady demand” for smallholding lots in Negeri Sembilan from 1909 through 1911: “Probably a large proportion of these lots were taken up with a view to cultivation of rubber” [NS AR 1911: 5]. Evidently land speculation played some hand in the rise of this “steady demand.” The Negri Sembilan Administration Report for the year 1912 comments:

These figures [increasing land applications] indicate a steady demand for land by native cultivators, but would be more satisfactory if all the small holdings taken up remained in the hands of small cultivators. Unfortunately, a certain number of them are sold after a year or two, in some cases before they have even been planted, but usually after being cleared and planted with rubber trees, to adjacent estates or persons who are already considerable land owners, . . . [NS AR 1912: 6]

Heightened activities to open up new estates and smallholdings for rubber cultivation obviously diverted labour from rice cultivation.

Whilst the failure of the crop in 1911 was, in the main, due to lack of rain and to sickness among the Malay population, there is but little doubt that padi-planting tends to decline in popularity, for such is the demand for labour that the Malay finds that he can earn high wages and afford to buy rice instead of growing it. [NS AR 1911: 5]

The frequent ups and downs in the total acreage of sawah cultivation between 1911 and 1917 also generally reflected the fluctuation of rubber prices in the world market. The rubber planting

boom, which had cooled somewhat in response to the 1913 price plunge, began to pick up again after a modest recovery in rubber prices between 1915 and 1916. Thus, the District Officer of Kuala Pilah made the following comment on the condition in his district in 1916:

The local Malays were badly bitten with the rubber craze, partly no doubt owing to the example set by Europeans and others, but chiefly I think, as a large number of small holdings came into bearing during 1916 and it was seen how profitable a few acres of rubber in bearing are at present. Hundreds of Malays thronged the office daily clamouring for land and the books [of the Mukim Register] had to be closed on two occasions during the year. [AR KP 1916: 3]

The “craze” obviously reactivated the diversion of labour from rice cultivation. The Negri Sembilan Administration Report for the year 1916 observes: “The total [cultivated sawah in Negeri Sembilan] shows a small increase, but the native Malay population is far too engrossed in planting rubber to take much interest in opening up new sawahs, and the care of the fields is being to an increasing extent left to the women” [NS AR 1916: 6]. During the period 1911–1917, rice planting was clearly adversely affected by high rubber prices and resultant fervour for rubber cultivation and rubber tapping.

The oscillating, inverse relationship between rice cultivation and rubber prices apparently became a well-established pattern by the 1920s. Thus, in 1925 when rubber prices were very high, “The prosperity of the majority of the small holders appears to have had a bad effect generally on the planting of padi, admittedly, hard work and risky” [AR KP 1925: 5]. Yet, in 1931, “The depression in the price of rubber led to greater keenness in planting up all available [padi] land” [NS AR 1931: 8]. And, still, several years later, “It is thought that the chief reason for this [existence of uncultivated sawah] was the high price of rubber at the time when planting became due: it cannot be denied that a usual result in this district of a high price of small-holders’ rubber is a certain reluctance on the part of sawah-owners to plant their padi-fields” [AR KP 1937: n.p.]. The inverse relationship between rice and rubber was evidently still observable after World War Two. Though referring to the situation in the Federation of Malaya in general, it is reported that the inception of the Korean war boom in 1951 was coupled with “a decline of 6 per cent in the actual acreage under [rice] cultivation, because of the greater attraction of rubber-tapping” [Meek 1961: 212].

## II Relative Stability in the Total Acreage of Cultivated Sawah

One of the most interesting observations in Table 1 is that, except for the fluctuation during the period 1911–1917, the total acreage of cultivated sawah in Negeri Sembilan remained more or less constant over the years under consideration, averaging about 32,000 acres. (In fact, the 32,000 acre level of sawah cultivation was by and large maintained until 1970, as will be discussed later.) There was no substantial expansion of sawah cultivation, nor a remarkable contraction as was observed between 1911 and 1917. This was so irrespective of the increasing population pressure and occasional recurrences of high rubber prices after 1917, for example, during the late 1930s and

the Korean war boom of the early 1950s. Even the above passage mentions a decline of a mere 6 percent in the sawah cultivation rate during the Korean war boom.<sup>11)</sup>

Tables 1 and 2 in short pose two rather contradictory yet intriguing questions. Why, on one hand, did the total acreage of sawah cultivation not expand in step with population increase? And why, on the other, did it not contract as the cultivation of rubber, pricewise a volatile yet profitable commercial crop, proliferated in Negeri Sembilan?

As has been pointed out, in addition to ecological and climatic limitations, the ready availability of economic pursuits other than rice cultivation was one reason for the non-expansion of sawah cultivation. The introduction of a lucrative cash crop, that is, cultivated rubber, further expanded the scope of economic alternatives.

*Adat* (a body of social etiquette, custom and tradition) is another factor to be reckoned with in understanding the lack of sawah expansion in Negeri Sembilan. The Malays of Negeri Sembilan adhere to matrilineal *Adat Perpatih*. According to this *adat*, houses, housing compounds and sawah belong to women. The advent of rubber smallholdings presented a new type of property which largely fell outside the explicit control of *adat*. The British interpretation of *Adat Perpatih* and its legislation of *adat* regulations relating to land further strengthened the status of rubber smallholdings as a property not legally bound by *adat*. Consequently, Malay men in Negeri Sembilan evidently became more interested in opening rubber smallholdings, over whose disposition they could exert more control, than in expanding sawah.

The lack of severe contraction of sawah cultivation after 1917 was partly the result of a government regulation. The colonial government was not enthusiastic about Malay involvement in rubber cultivation, especially to the extent that the Malay peasants neglected rice cultivation. This attitude became particularly pronounced after British Malaya experienced an acute shortage and thus a steep rise in the price of imported rice during World War One. "Since the early 1920's rubber production by smallholders has been strongly discouraged by the authorities in many different ways, and official pressure was always exercised in favour of food production and against rubber growing" [Bauer 1948: 64]. The onset of the Great Depression in 1929 and the subsequent plunge in rubber prices strengthened the colonial government's concern with food production. As a reflection of this concern, in 1930 a special committee, the Rice Cultivation Committee, was appointed to look into and make recommendations on padi production in Peninsular Malaysia [Dennis 1982: 105].

One of the committee's recommendations was that "in relation to land tenure the period of non-cultivation in padi which is required to elapse before padi lands can be resumed by Government should be reduced from three to two years" [*Report of the Rice Cultivation Committee Volume I* 1931: 2]. Actually the very same suggestion had already been made by A. Caldecott, British Resident of Negeri Sembilan, to the Rice Cultivation Committee when the committee visited him on a fact-finding tour: "He [Caldecott] also mentioned it might be better to reduce the three-year clause regarding neglect to plant padi land in considering resumption, . . ." [*Report of the Rice Cultivation*

11) However, note that the sawah cultivation rate in Negeri Sembilan did fall by more than 16 percent between 1949 and 1953 (Table 1).

*Committee Volume II* 1931 : 57].

It is not clear how stringently the resumption of neglected padi lands was carried out or how effective this policy was in discouraging the outright neglect of sawah cultivation. After a similar fact-finding tour to the district of Jelebu in Negeri Sembilan, Dato Jelebu (adat chief of Jelebu) stated to the Rice Cultivation Committee "that resumption of land for three years non-cultivation was not a sufficient punishment but that in addition fines should be imposed." Thereupon "Mr. [Charleton N.] Maxwell [a committee member] asked if Dato Jelebu thought resumption of land was a failure because the people got back their land later through relations." Dato Jelebu's answer was "that was not the case" [*ibid.* : 65]. Although Dato Jelebu's comments are far from straightforward, the resumption clause in land tenure regulations must have discouraged the neglect of padi fields.<sup>12)</sup>

Another factor in the maintenance of a relatively constant level of cultivated sawah acreage was economic. After experiencing shortage and high prices of imported rice during World War One, Malay peasants must have realized the importance of maintaining a certain level of sawah cultivation as a hedge against economic depression.

A key to understanding the previously mentioned mystery of the unchanging cultivated sawah acreage despite mounting population pressure on one hand and expanding rubber cultivation on the other lies, I believe, in the increasing division of labour between men and women in Negeri Sembilan, namely, rubber cultivation and tapping for men and rice cultivation for women.<sup>13)</sup> It is my contention that the first three decades of the twentieth century witnessed increasing male preoccupation with rubber tapping and decreasing involvement in rice cultivation, and, correspondingly, increasing female entrenchment in rice cultivation.

To be sure, the major burden of rice cultivation always seems to have fallen on women rather than men in Negeri Sembilan. Rathborne [1984 : 54] makes the following observation concerning the Malay division of labour by sex, most probably referring to the situation in Negeri Sembilan in the 1880s : "The women cook, carry water, see to the house, and work in the fields, where a great proportion of the manual labour is done by them." Even given this long-standing tendency, the spread of rubber cultivation seems to have further encouraged men's dissociation from rice cultivation. Let me quote again the passage I cited from the Negri Sembilan Administration Report for 1916 : "The total [cultivated sawah in Negeri Sembilan] shows a small increase, but the native Malay population is far too engrossed in planting rubber to take much interest in opening up new sawahs, and the care of the fields is being to an increasing extent left to the women" [NS AR 1916 : 6]. Likewise, the Annual Report of Kuala Pilah District for the same year states : "Where the [padi] crop was a poor one, the reason was solely and purely neglect. In Juasseh especially the work was left entirely to the women, and the people gave me the impression that they planted in

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12) Unfortunately I do not know which law contained this resumption clause. It was probably either the Rice Lands Enactment of 1917, the Land Code of 1926 or the Padi Planting Rule of 1927. *Report of the Rice Cultivation Committee Volume I* [1931 : 21] refers to these laws but does not explain what they actually are. Of these three laws, the Land Code of 1926 appears to be most important in this respect, judging from the way it was referred to in *Report of the Rice Cultivation Committee Volume II* [1931 : 1, 5].

13) The question of increasing division of labour between men and women is more fully discussed in Kato [1991 : 144-148].

order to escape a prosecution but did not care whether they got padi or not" [AR KP 1916: 6].

Admittedly, this division of labour by sex was not rigid. It is known that women (and children) often tapped rubber around the settlements and also did so in times of male labour shortage.<sup>14)</sup> Undoubtedly men must have helped women in the paddy fields when their assistance was needed. Yet, by and large, I maintain, men were increasingly preoccupied with rubber cultivation, while women were more or less confined to subsistence agriculture. This pattern of division of labour was observable even in the latter half of the 1950s [Lewis 1962; Swift 1965] and in the mid-1960s, and is still discernible today [Peletz 1988: 177].<sup>15)</sup>

One possible result of men's increasing dissociation from rice cultivation was the declining padi production per sawah acreage. Although conclusive evidence is hard to come by, some production figures indicate such a historical trend. Information from the latter half of the nineteenth century suggests that average yields of sawah were 400 *gantang* per acre or in some areas between 320 and 360 *gantang*.<sup>16)</sup> The previously quoted passage states: "On the whole, standards of cultivation amongst the Minangkabau [in Negeri Sembilan] were superior to those of Malacca, a fact attested to by numerous observers, ..." and "the popular view was that yields in the Minangkabau region [Negeri Sembilan] were superior to those of the plain [Malacca]" [Hill 1977: 130, 134]. The average yield in Malacca was estimated to be between 200 and 240 *gantang* per acre [*loc. cit.*].

Production figures presented in *Report of the Rice Cultivation Committee* of 1930 are considerably different from those mentioned above. The average yield for Negeri Sembilan, calculated on the basis of data supplied by District Officers, was about 200 *gantang* per acre [*Report of the Rice Cultivation Committee Volume II* 1931: 1]. Likewise, according to the Annual Reports by the Department of Agriculture of the Federated Malay States, the average annual yield in Negeri Sembilan between 1921 and 1938 was 185 *gantang* per acre, with a minimum of 124 and the maximum of 252 *gantang* (calculated from Lim [1977: 257]; also see Peletz [1988: 153]). The corresponding figure for Malacca was 349 *gantang* per acre [*Report of the Rice Cultivation Committee Volume II* 1931: 3-4]. Thus, between the late nineteenth century and 1930, the average sawah yields per acre for Negeri Sembilan dropped considerably and even were surpassed by those for Malacca, a plains country which used to have lower average yields than Negeri Sembilan.<sup>17)</sup>

I speculate that men's dissociation from rice cultivation partly accounts for the dramatic drop in average rice yields in Negeri Sembilan. Lack of participation by men must have caused difficulty in

14) Referring to the pre-war situation in Malaya in general, Bauer [1948: 7] says: "the rubber trees in and around the villages [settlements] are often tapped by the wife and children of the smallholders." Rubber was also often tapped by women during the Emergency in Malaya when many men joined the security forces [NS AR 1949: 14]. It is my impression that many of the widowed or divorced women tap rubber in contemporary Negeri Sembilan; and this may well have been the case too during the colonial period.

15) The Third-Quarter Agricultural Report of Negeri Sembilan of 1965 makes the following comment on this point: "What is troublesome (*merunsingkan*) in Negeri Sembilan concerns the condition and cultivation methods of sawah. Sawah are very small and owned by women and mostly worked by women" (my translation from Malay) [*Penyata Sukutahun Yang Ketiga* 1965 1965: 3].

16) One *gantang* is about one imperial gallon.

17) The Rice Cultivation Committee formed its own opinion on the question of average yields in Negeri Sembilan from other sources of information than District Officers. They reached the figure of about 300 ↗

repairing dams and irrigation channels, making bunds in sawah, and ploughing or even hoeing sawah deeply. Moreover, the greater availability of ready cash through their husbands' rubber tapping might have made women increasingly indifferent to padi planting than might otherwise have been the case. According to the previously quoted passage from the Annual Report of the Kuala Pilah District for the year 1916, "Where [padi] crop was a poor one, the reason was solely and purely neglect. In Juasseh especially the work was left entirely to the women, and the people gave me the impression that they planted in order to escape a prosecution but did not care whether they got padi or not" [AR KP 1916: 6].<sup>18)</sup>

Be that as it may, the division of labour by sex killed three birds with one stone, so to speak. Husbands could concentrate on rubber tapping, a cash-earning activity, while wives secured at least some amount of subsistence crop. Divorces were not uncommon during the colonial period and the cultivation of sawah served as a minimum hedge against such eventuality for women, as well as against falling rubber prices. In this way, they could also evade punishment by the government for neglecting their padi planting.

This remarkable arrangement ceased to function after the late 1960s. Sawah cultivation acreage, which had been, as it were, buoyed at the 32,000 acre level for so many years, suddenly began to fall dramatically starting from the early 1970s.

### III Sawah Cultivation in Negeri Sembilan after 1960

In 1980 two events occurred which signalled the official recognition of the increasing seriousness of tanah terbiar or uncultivated lands in Peninsular Malaysia. One was the compilation of "Laporan Pembangunan Tanah-Tanah Terbiar" (Report on the Development of Uncultivated Lands) by the Pasukan Petugas Bagi Mengusahakan Tanah-Tanah Terbiar (Task Force to Activate Uncultivated Lands) of the Ministry of Agriculture. The other was the holding of a three-day workshop on the development of uncultivated lands (Bengkel Pembangunan Tanah-Tanah Terbiar), organized by the Ministry of Agriculture and the Ministry of Land and Regional Development.<sup>19)</sup> These events probably did not attract much public attention, but there is no doubt that the proportion of uncultivated lands in Peninsular Malaysia in general began to reach an alarming level by 1980.

↘ gantang per acre as "a fair average return for Negeri Sembilan" [*Report of the Rice Cultivation Committee Volume II* 1931: 1]. This estimate may be a little too high in view of the above-mentioned statistics supplied by the Department of Agriculture of the Federated Malay States. In either case, this high estimate does not basically disturb the argument developed here.

18) Another possible factor in the declining average rice yields was ecological damage brought by the spread of rubber cultivation. Although the influence of this factor is undeniable, there also seems to be a strong correlation between rubber prices and low average yields. For example, in the period 1925–1928 when rubber prices were very high, the average yields in Negeri Sembilan were about 125 gantang per acre; and they rose from 173 to over 200 gantang after the Great Depression [Lim 1977: 257].

19) The workshop was held at the headquarters of MARDI (Malaysian Agricultural Research and Development Institute) at Serdang, 5–7 October, 1980. According to Fujimoto [1991: 438, n. 5], a Task Force on Idle Land was established in the Ministry of Agriculture in 1980; it released the unpublished "Task Force Report on Idle Land" in 1982. I do not know if the two task forces and their corresponding two reports are one and the same.



According to the official definition of the above-mentioned task force, tanah terbiar are "those lands whose ownerships are already dispensed but which have been uncultivated or neglected continuously for more than three years, be they rice lands or non-rice lands."<sup>20)</sup> If this definition is applied to data in the task force's report, about 22 percent of the non-rice lands and 28 percent of the rice-lands remained uncultivated in Peninsular Malaysia in 1980. It is likely that these figures are a little inflated, since long-standing uncultivated sawah seem to have been excluded from data in the report.<sup>21)</sup> A more realistic figure for the rate of uncultivated sawah is 18 percent in 1981, as is indicated in Table 3, although this is still a considerable figure.<sup>22)</sup> Table 3 reveals that the proportion of uncultivated sawah in Negeri Sembilan, namely, 64 percent, was the highest in Peninsular Malaysia in 1981. Fujimoto [1987: 79-80] indicates that uncultivated sawah became conspicuous in Peninsular Malaysia in the latter half of the 1970s. However, the situation in Negeri Sembilan progressed earlier than this.

Table 4 is based on data I compiled from Annual Reports of various years published by the Department of Agriculture of Negeri Sembilan. The table suggests a number of tentative conclusions concerning the development, or rather the decline, of rice cultivation in Negeri Sembilan after 1960. First, the steady level of about 32,000 acres of cultivated sawah was maintained for the main-season crop up to 1970 with the exception of 1964 and 1968. As pointed out before, this was the level attained at the beginning of this century. In the meantime, the population of the state

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- 20) "*Tanah-tanah terbiar meliputi kawasan yang telah diberi hak milik tetapi tidak diusahakan atau terbiar langsung lebih dari tiga tahun secara berturut-turut samada di kawasan padi dan bukan padi*" [Pasukan Petugas Bagi Mengusahakan Tanah-Tanah Terbiar 1980: 2]. The specification of three years in this definition apparently originates from the National Land Code of 1965 whereby the government may take away grants in perpetuity over lands which are left continuously uncultivated for more than three years [Fujimoto 1988: 367, n. 5]. However, it may be recalled that the three-year specification is the same as that given in the British regulations on penalties against uncultivated sawah. The colonial regulations themselves in turn seem to be based on Malay adat or, at least, the British interpretation of Malay adat. For instance, the Chief Justice (of Malacca?) remarked in 1870: "It is well known that by old Malay law or custom of Malacca, while the sovereign was the owner of the soil, every man nevertheless had the right to clear and occupy all forest and waste lands, subject to the payment, to the Sovereign, of one tenth of the produce of the land so take . . . If he abandoned the paddy land or fruit trees for three years . . . his rights ceased . . ." [Hill 1977: 124].
- 21) According to the report, there were about 1,820,042 acres of uncultivated non-rice lands and 117,844 acres of uncultivated rice lands [Pasukan Petugas Bagi Mengusahakan Tanah-Tanah Terbiar 1980: ii, 100]. (The latter figure on uncultivated rice lands does not include those sawah which are cultivated for the main-season crop but not for the off-season crop. However, they are counted as part of uncultivated sawah in the report of the task force.) The total sawah areas in Peninsular Malaysia were 422,544 acres [ibid.: 100], while the total agricultural areas under all crops, including sawah, in Peninsular Malaysia are estimated to be roughly 8,600,000 acres around 1979 [Mohd. Ariff Hussein and Nyanen Thiran 1980: 1]. Unfortunately it is not clear what the figure of 422,544 acres actually represents. It is apparently not the gazetted areas, since, for example, the gazetted areas in Negeri Sembilan I previously quoted were 36,456 acres, while the figure of 422,544 acres only incorporates 19,297 acres of sawah areas in Negeri Sembilan.
- 22) Table 3 is based on Table 1 in Fujimoto [1988: 339], whose original source is *Task Force Report on Idle Land*, released in 1982 by the Malaysian Ministry of Agriculture. (See also Fujimoto [1991: Table IV, 438].) The figures in the original table are in hectares but are converted into acres in Table 3. Idle sawah here refer to those sawah which remain totally uncultivated for more than three years and do not include sawah which are cultivated for the main-season crop but not for the off-season crop.

**Table 3** Estimates of Uncultivated Sawah in Peninsular Malaysia, 1981 (in acres)

State	Total Sawah Acreage	Uncultivated Acreage	Rate of Uncultivation
Perlis	63,628	0	0.0%
Kedah	307,857	10,769	3.5%
Penang	44,967	13,919	31.0%
Perak	124,901	22,303	17.9%
Selangor	51,056	3,526	6.9%
Malacca	28,409	8,238	29.0%
Negeri Sembilan	36,455	23,193	63.6%
Johor	10,475	4,154	39.7%
Pahang	44,453	24,683	55.5%
Trengganu	71,995	17,366	24.1%
Kelantan	208,617	49,442	23.7%
Total	992,813	177,593	17.9%

Source : Adapted from Fujimoto [1988 : 339]

**Table 4** Sawah Cultivation in Negeri Sembilan, 1963–1990 (in acres)

Year	Main-season	Cultivation Rate	Off-season	Mechanized Cultivation
1963	31,229	85.7%	n.a.	1,540
1964	28,201	77.4%	202	703
1965	32,014	87.8%	1,110	n.a.
1966	32,014	87.8%	2,537	1,788
1967	32,007	87.8%	4,907	n.a.
1968	27,703	76.0%	6,390	6,926
1969	32,073	88.0%	6,708	9,060
1970	31,831	87.3%	10,494	10,878
1971	24,956	68.5%	15,736	10,422
1972	23,292	63.9%	17,645	26,947
1973	18,562	50.9%	17,494	14,501
1974	17,423	47.8%	9,003	16,189
1975	18,519	50.8%	16,833	18,794
1976	18,971	52.0%	6,726	10,796
1977	11,476	31.5%	5,731	679
1978	11,473	31.5%	8,201	n.a.
1979	9,150	25.1%	7,401	4,198
1980	5,990	16.4%	3,692	7,351
1981	8,439	23.1%	3,941	n.a.
1982	7,638	21.0%	2,782	1,151
1983	8,970	24.6%	1,690	5,234
1984	8,824	24.2%	1,354	1,722
1985	7,759	21.3%	1,665	n.a.
1986	7,769	21.3%	892	n.a.
1987	5,634	15.5%	1,705	n.a.
1988	5,085	13.9%	598	n.a.
1989	3,976	10.9%	2,118	n.a.
1990	2,483	6.8%	n.a.	n.a.

Source : Annual Reports of the Department of Agriculture, N.S.

multiplied fivefold, from 96,028 to 480,053, between 1901 and 1970; the Malay component of the population alone increased fourfold from 55,549 to 217,612 during the same period [Peletz 1988: 132].

Having maintained a steady level for such a long time, the cultivated acreage of sawah experienced a sudden and seemingly irreversible dive in 1971: it shrank by 22 percent between 1970 and 1971. The subsequent figures show a more or less constant decline in the cultivated sawah acreage for the main-season crop.

This observation notwithstanding, we should also note that the combined acreage of main-season and off-season crops in Table 4 generally surpassed the 32,000 acre level until 1975. After 1976, however, both the main-season and off-season cultivations began to decline rapidly, indicating how short-lived the "success" of double cropping was in Negeri Sembilan. Thus, we can in fact recognize two stages in the multiplication of uncultivated sawah in Negeri Sembilan. Firstly, the main-season sawah cultivation started decreasing in 1971. This decline was initially compensated by the expansion of off-season cultivation. But, starting in 1976, the off-season cultivation also began to contract rapidly, accompanied by a further decline in the main-season cultivation.<sup>23)</sup> These observations strongly suggest that the introduction of double cropping was directly implicated in the rise of uncultivated sawah.

The first entry for the off-season crop in Table 4 was registered in 1964. However, it was most probably not until 1966 that the double-cropping policy began to be pursued systematically in Peninsular Malaysia. In this year all the states in Peninsular Malaysia except Kedah adopted land rules which regulated the timing and methods of sawah preparation and cultivation; Kedah adopted similar rules in 1969 [Mohd. Helmi bin Mohd Hussain 1980: 6]. Although I have not been able to check these rules, I presume that they were adopted in order to standardize and synchronize the cultivation cycle of double cropping.<sup>24)</sup>

Table 4 reveals three stages in the rise and fall of the off-season sawah cultivation in Negeri Sembilan. Between 1964 and 1970, the acreage of off-season cultivation increased without greatly influencing the main-season cultivation. From 1971 until 1975, with the exception of 1974, the off-season cultivation attained a very high level of 15,000 to 17,000 acres. The main-season cultivation, in the meantime, underwent a dramatic decline of 22 to 45 percent over the 1970 cultivation acreage. From 1976 or 1977 onward, there has been an almost unstoppable decline in

23) Fujimoto [1987: 79-80] also made a similar observation in relation to the decline of sawah cultivation in Peninsular Malaysia in general. However, as mentioned above, the trend in Negeri Sembilan started about five years earlier than this.

24) In this connection, it may not be a coincidence that the Indian head of the Department of Agriculture of Negeri Sembilan was replaced by a Malay in 1966, since when the position has remained in the Malay hands. (This conclusion on personnel change was obtained by checking the names of the department heads attached to the Annual Reports of the Department of Agriculture, Negeri Sembilan.) Double cropping was introduced mainly for the benefit of the rice-cultivating Malays; and it must have been deemed natural that such a policy should be implemented under the Malay agricultural administration head in Negeri Sembilan and, probably, elsewhere in western Malaysia. I suspect that the Malay domination of top government administrative positions in general, both at the state and federal levels, may have already started around this time, namely, several years before the initiation of the New Economic Policy.

the acreage of cultivated sawah, both for the main-season and the off-season crops.

In attempting to explain the decline of rice cultivation and thus the emergence of uncultivated sawah in Negeri Sembilan (and in Peninsular Malaysia in general), many factors have been mentioned. Among them are labour shortage in the village due to out-migration, adverse ecological consequences of the opening of forests for logging concessions or FELDA schemes (settlement and colonization schemes for rubber and later oil palm smallholders, sponsored by the Federal Land Development Authority), water problems aggravated by inefficient or badly-planned irrigation and drainage projects, fragmentation and multiple ownership of sawah due to inheritance practices based on Adat Perpatih, unprofitability of rice cultivation as an economic pursuit, chronic diseases associated with the quick-maturing and high-yielding varieties of rice, and increasing availability of other economic opportunities than rice cultivation [Nyanen Thiran 1981 : 28–33; Peletz 1988 : 160–162; Horii 1989 : 251].

To this list, we may add here water problems caused by the development of road systems, increasing dependence on mechanization for the initial stage of land preparation, the political and thus administrative reluctance after Malaysia's Independence in 1957 to carry out unpopular penalties against non-cultivation of sawah, the generally stable and improved conditions of the Malaysian economy after the implementation of the New Economic Policy, the relatively constant supply of moderately-priced rice imported or smuggled from Thailand, and the greater strength of conjugal bonds and, simultaneously, the increased female hold on the cash economy, both of which have given women the option of not engaging in sawah cultivation altogether.<sup>25)</sup> Let me elaborate on some of these factors.

According to some villagers I talked to in the district of Kuala Pilah, the development of infrastructure sometimes disturbed water distribution systems. The rerouting of roads, for example, resulted in some cases in existing irrigation channels being cut off, thereby stopping water supply to some rice fields. A similar type of problem was already apparent during the pre-war period. Though referring to Peninsular Malaysia in general, *Report of the Rice Cultivation Committee Volume II* [1931 : 3] notes : "in certain districts construction of railways and more rarely of roads has interfered to some extent with irrigation." In Negeri Sembilan too, "the Railways did upset water flow in small patches" [*ibid.* : 68].

The introduction of double cropping was usually accompanied by the disappearance of labour sharing practices, which in turn went hand in hand with the peasants' increasing dependence on mechanization. The development of mechanization in Negeri Sembilan is indicated in the right-hand column of Table 4. It is not clear why the sawah acreage prepared by tractors dropped suddenly after 1976. A Malay official at the Department of Agriculture, Negeri Sembilan, told me in 1991 that from around this time government-owned tractors were mainly used for government projects and rarely hired out to peasant rice cultivators. He also added that Chinese merchants, who usually owned tractors for hire, began to prefer renting them for housing projects than for peasants : the

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25) One expression of the increasing female dissociation from rice cultivation is the prevalence of self-identified *suri rumah tangga* ("fulltime" housewives or, literally, the queens of the household) among married women in rural Negeri Sembilan.

former provided greater and more dependable profits since Malay peasants, I was told, sometimes failed to pay up for hired tractors. In any case, the mechanization of land preparation has more or less established the practice that sawah is not cultivated unless the cultivator can secure access to a tractor at the appropriate time.

Evidently the development of mechanization has also brought about problems of different nature than the one discussed here. The usage of a large and heavy tractor for sawah tilling often destroys the pre-existing plough pans which are essential for preventing the seepage of water in sawah into the ground. Thus, tractor tilling tends to increase water consumption of sawah and disturb water distribution unless adequate irrigation facilities are provided. Another side of this phenomenon is the deepening of worked sawah soil as the level of plough pans usually goes down after the introduction of tractor tilling. As the depth of worked soil grows, works such as transplanting become more cumbersome.<sup>26)</sup>

I am sure that the above factors have in their own ways all contributed to the multiplication of uncultivated sawah. Yet, by themselves they do not explain the particular historical timing of the rise to prominence of uncultivated sawah in Negeri Sembilan. It is in this connection that the introduction of double cropping was crucial. I cannot say what accounts for the maintenance of the 32,000 acre level of sawah cultivation in Negeri Sembilan for such a long time. Other than the social, political and economic reasons already mentioned, social inertia or, shall we say, "tradition" could well have been decisive in this respect. Double cropping forcefully and fundamentally affected the practice of rice cultivation in Negeri Sembilan. It jerked society out of its inertia or tradition. It rocked the boat. It is within this context that the above mentioned factors began to gather force.

Let me explain some of the ways in which double cropping affected the existing practice of rice cultivation. Formerly, rice cultivation started with the arrival of the rainy season in Negeri Sembilan. Its exact timing varied from year to year and from region to region but, in general, this was in July or August. Accordingly, harvesting fell around February or March of the following year.

The introduction of quick-maturing varieties of rice and double cropping disturbed this old rice cultivation cycle (cf. Peletz [1988: 162-168]). Every year the Department of Agriculture of Negeri Sembilan assiduously posted on a special board in each local community a schedule for the start of main-season and off-season rice cultivations. (They more or less gave up on this practice a few years ago, after so much of the sawah became unproductive.) However, the unpredictability of yearly rainfall patterns of Negeri Sembilan did not necessarily accord with such a pre-set and tightly planned rice cultivation schedule, especially without good irrigation and drainage facilities.<sup>27)</sup>

Contrary to the government's expectation, the initiation of the double-cropping policy served only to make the rice cultivation cycles very irregular. Some people did double-crop, at least for a few years at the initial stage. Eventually, however, adverse climatic conditions, the unavailability of tractors at the right time for land preparation, a lack of money to purchase fertilizer and pesticide, or the practice of holding weddings after a harvest prevented people from keeping up with the busy

26) I owe this information to my agronomist colleague Tanaka Koji.

27) Concerning the irregularity of rainfall patterns in Negeri Sembilan during the colonial period, see Lim [1977: 62, n. 51].

schedule of double cropping. Some people, due to a late start in the cultivation of the off-season crop, forfeited the following main-season crop and eventually settled for the single cropping in either the off-season or the main-season. Some simply went back to the cultivation of the main-season crop only. Some switched back and forth between the main-season only and off-season only cultivations. Yet others gave up rice cultivation altogether because their sawah were too deep for the use of tractors or too far from roads to carry fertilizer or pesticide. Consequently, the rice cultivation cycles in the Negeri Sembilan village became variable and irregular according to the circumstances of the individual peasant households.

Under the old rice cultivation regimen, peasants would start the cultivation cycle more or less simultaneously within a particular community. In the pre-war period, rice cultivation was accompanied by elaborate community-wide rituals and household-based rituals. Although the community-wide rituals began to disappear around the 1930s, the household-based rituals were still performed in relation to *semangat padi* (the rice spirit) up to the late 1950s [Lewis 1962; Kato 1988]. The introduction of new rice varieties in the mid-1960s, however, made even the household-based rituals less meaningful. As one village elder in the district of Kuala Pilah told me, these new varieties, which have not been handed down from earlier generations, do not have any *semangat padi*.

It is clear that rice cultivation in pre-1960 Negeri Sembilan could not produce enough rice to feed half of the Malay population of the state, let alone the entire state population. Its economic significance was limited even in the rice cultivating peasant households. Nevertheless, rice cultivation as an institution inculcated a sense of "tradition," provided the assured yearly rhythm of events and activities, supported the communal spirit and enriched the texture of everyday village life in the Malay community of Negeri Sembilan. After the introduction of double cropping, rice cultivation lost its communal and cultural underpinning. It is in this sense that the introduction of double cropping was catalytic in unharnessing all the emerging forces which militated against the maintenance of rice cultivation in Negeri Sembilan. The cultural and communal, in short "traditional," bulwark was broken.

As mentioned, villagers in a particular community used to coordinate their cultivation cycle while still planting rice only once a year. Thus it was clear who planted and who did not in each cultivation season. This visibility of negligence in sawah cultivation must have also worked as a strong negative sanction against those who wished to abandon rice cultivation.

After the introduction of double cropping, the coordinated rhythm of the rice cultivation cycle was lost, despite the government's intention to the contrary. At virtually any given time in the year, adjoining rice fields might be at different stages of cultivation or non-cultivation. In this situation the visibility of negligence in rice cultivation well-nigh evaporated.

Presumably it was not an easy decision for peasants to abandon their centuries-old rice cultivation. It so happened that the introduction of double cropping prepared the ground for rice cultivation's fade-out over a period of ten years in three stages: initially, a gradual expansion of the off-season cultivation without much impact on the main-season cultivation; a further off-season expansion accompanied by a decrease in the acreage of main-season cultivation; and finally the demise of both the main-season and off-season cultivations. Double cropping and the subsequent

disturbance of the rice cultivation cycles were instigated not at the peasants' volition but with strong government guidance and ample subsidies. If the double-cropping policy failed and uncultivated sawah began to multiply, it was not the fault of the Negeri Sembilan peasants, who had tried their best. It was a comforting rationalization for the peasants to eventually shed whatever residue of "the moral value of rice cultivation," "the ideology of rice," and "the high moral valuation of padi growing" they might still have possessed.

#### IV Idle Paddy Fields or Abandoned Paddy Fields?

The official Malaysian designation (and common appellation) of sawah which remains continuously uncultivated for more than three years is sawah terbiar. "*Ter-biar*" is a difficult term to translate into English. "*Biar*" is a root verb of "*membiar*" or "*membiarkan*," that is, to let go or neglect. "*Ter*" is a prefix, signifying an action which has occurred unintentionally or a state resulting from a particular action whose actor is not mentioned. Sawah terbiar, then, literally means paddy field in the state of neglect or paddy field which is unintentionally neglected. I do not know the official English translation of this term but some use "idle sawah" and others "unused sawah" [Burrows 1980; Nyanen Thiran 1981]. It seems that idle sawah is frequently used in government documents for this purpose.<sup>28)</sup>

The above terminological consideration, though seemingly trivial, reveals the Malaysian government's basic understanding of the nature of sawah terbiar. The government views sawah terbiar as the result of (largely Malay) peasants' unintentional actions. It assumes that peasants are still essentially committed to rice cultivation. It is due to unexpected circumstances surrounding rice cultivation, e.g., labour shortage and water problems that peasants are forced to leave sawah idle for the time being. Given government assistance to ameliorate these adverse circumstances, it is expected that rice cultivation will be resumed on part of the sawah terbiar. The government accordingly has adopted policies to promote group-farming and mini-estates in order to make rice cultivation economically more viable through sawah consolidation and government subsidies.<sup>29)</sup> A steady increase in the amount of sawah terbiar in Table 4 betrays the failure of such government policies, at least in Negeri Sembilan.

Sawah terbiar indeed must have been *idle* sawah at an early stage of its history. Nevertheless, I believe it is nowadays more appropriate to construe it, especially in Negeri Sembilan, as *abandoned* sawah. How could it be otherwise when over 70 percent of the gazetted sawah has lain uncultivated for more than ten years? Neglect of sawah cultivation is a deliberate action or a state resulting from a deliberate action taken by peasants; it is no longer a consequence of unfortuitous circumstances. This much the government seems to recognize today. *Fifth Malaysia Plan 1986-1990* [1986: 304] refers to "the increase in abandoned *padi* land" as one of the reasons for the

28) For example, a report by the Malaysian Ministry of Agriculture in 1982 is titled *Task Force Report on Idle Land* according to Fujimoto [1988: 339].

29) Referring to Peninsular Malaysia in general, these policies are explained in Fujimoto [1988: 341-345; 1991: 439-441].

decrease in Malaysian padi production by 1.1 percent per annum between 1980 and 1985.

Change in the understanding of sawah terbiar is significant in two ways. The idea of abandoned sawah suggests that villagers in contemporary Negeri Sembilan largely lack the ability or will to reinstate rice cultivation in sawah terbiar. Any attempt at rehabilitation will inevitably have to come from outside sources, e.g., commercial agriculture by outside capital.<sup>30)</sup>

## V Structural Changes in Malay Society

The new understanding of "sawah terbiar" forces us to come to grips with structural changes in Malay society (and Malaysian society in general) which have brought about abandoned sawah. These structural changes may be comprehended in two broad and interrelated processes of "de-agriculturalization" and "de-kampung-ization" of Malay (and Malaysian) society. Malays of Negeri Sembilan, especially the young, are simply not interested in agriculture. Single girls prefer factory work to rice cultivation. It is not just sawah which are terbiar. Increasingly, rubber smallholdings are being left untapped, even though there might be unemployed youth in the village.<sup>31)</sup> Unemployed young men are not interested in rubber tapping unless compelling circumstances such as marriage impel them to look for a means of supporting a newly established household in the village. Increasingly high educational standards, changing occupational orientations, and rising Malay economic expectations under the New Economic Policy all conspire to extinguish the young generation's interest in agriculture, including rice cultivation and rubber tapping.

"De-agriculturalization," however, would not actually take place unless Negeri Sembilan villagers, whether young or old, can afford not to be interested in agriculture. Many studies in Negeri Sembilan indicate that villagers nowadays rely on agriculture far less than they used to for their living. Quite a few able-bodied men and women in the village work as teachers or office clerks; some, such as ex-teachers or policemen, receive government pensions; yet others receive remittances from their children working elsewhere [Azizah Kassim 1988: 143-144; Peletz 1988: 182-183]. In Zulkepli Awaluddin's study in a village in the district of Kuala Pilah in 1986, 61.4 percent of 44 respondents claimed that their livelihood was better than before, while 31.8 percent mentioned that it is more or less the same. This was so despite a high rate of sawah terbiar in the village studied, that is, 84 percent of the irrigable sawah [Zulkepli Awaluddin 1987: 61]. Apparently many villagers in Negeri Sembilan nowadays can live quite comfortably without getting involved in agriculture, particularly since the New Economic Policy began to improve their economic conditions.

In step with de-agriculturalization is the progression of "de-kampung-ization," that is, the

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30) I saw two such instances in my short visit to the district of Kuala Pilah in January 1991, which had not been observed before. One was an attempt by Malay capital from Malacca to carry out commercial cultivation of rice through broadcasting and mechanization; the other a Chinese entrepreneur from Malacca leasing Malay sawah terbiar to cultivate vegetables for Chinese restaurants. In the Malacca countryside I also encountered a case of a Chinese leasing Malay sawah terbiar to grow melons (probably "honeydew melons") for the export market such as Japan and Taiwan.

31) Fujimoto also points out the seriousness of abandoned rubber smallholdings in Peninsular Malaysia [Fujimoto 1988: 367, n. 4].



increasing physical and psychological distance between the kampong (village) and a part of the Malay populace of rural origin. Many people, again especially the young, migrate to towns and cities. In terms of educational and occupational opportunities and desirable lifestyle, urban living is much more attractive to the young generation than rural existence. As a result of outmigration, some districts such as Kuala Pilah and Rembau have experienced a slight population decrease in the last ten years or so.

One reflection of rural depopulation is an acute drop in the student enrollment in village schools. In Inas where I conducted my case study, the enrollment at its *sekolah kebangsaan* (primary school) stayed above 300 students at the beginning of each school year through the 1960s and most of the 1970s. The highest enrollment of 379 was registered in 1975. Since then the enrollment has fallen more or less continuously. It dropped to 297 in 1979, breaking the 300 line. The 200 line was broken only five years later, namely, when enrollment fell to 188 in 1984. The enrollment in 1990 was 151, less than half of what it was 25 years ago, i.e., 333 in 1966.

Migrants still frequently come back to their "native" village to visit their parents at weekends or during school vacations, to attend the weddings of sibling or relatives, and to celebrate the end of the Islamic fasting month. They send remittances back home so that their parents can maintain a certain economic standard of living or life-style. They persuade their mothers, so I was often told in the Kuala Pilah district, not to cultivate sawah any more since they are afraid or ashamed (*malu*) of gossip that they do not provide their mothers with large enough remittances.

A strange scene now extends across the countryside of Negeri Sembilan. Former sawah are covered with bushes and shrubs; rubber smallholdings too are sometimes full of thick undergrowth which indicates that nobody goes there for tapping. Yet, one sees many large and beautiful houses lining a paved road which runs through the village. The houses are beautiful because they belong to pensioners who returned to the village for retirement or to people who are helped by children living in the city. They are large because the owners want enough space to accommodate their children and grandchildren who visit them; the children themselves are most likely to have their own houses in the towns and cities but not in the village. The whole scene reminds me of the hit song "*Pulang Lah Orang Mudo*" (Go Home, Young People) by Hang Mokhtar, who himself hails from an Adat Perpatih background.

Those of you who have gone on migration,  
It is better you go back to the village,  
Cows, water buffaloes, goats, all of them,  
There is nobody who wants to take care of them,

Lands too are mostly *terbiar*,  
Bushes and shrubs stretch for acres and acres,  
Coconuts fall, but nobody bothers to pick them up,  
Sago trees fall down by themselves,

T. KATO : The Emergence of Abandoned Paddy Fields

Not many stay in the village,  
Those who stay are mostly old people,  
Young men and women,  
All have gone on migration,

Men who stay in the village,  
All are already on pensions,  
What can they still do?  
Only chat at the coffee shop,

Better go home, young people,  
Than go on migration without any clear purpose,  
Lands covered with bushes we clear,  
At least we can plant beans there,

An empty *surau* [Islamic prayer house] we will fill up,  
Sometimes at the sunset prayer only the *imam* [leader of the prayer] is there,  
I can hardly bring myself to talk about what the others are doing,  
Some keep playing checkers until dusk,

Go home, young people.<sup>32)</sup>

The song was a hit in 1990 and I heard it often over the car radio when I commuted between Inas and the Department of Agriculture of Negeri Sembilan at Seremban in order to work at their library. It was a hit as a song but not as a prompter of reverse migration by the young generation. Himself probably an urban dweller, Hang Mokhtar would be the last person to expect such reverse migration to take place.

Abandoned paddy fields, de-agriculturalization, and de-kampong-ization all signal far-reaching social change in rural Negeri Sembilan which goes beyond simply the economic sphere. They pose

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32) The original lyrics are :

*Pada kau poi mengantau/Lebih baik kau balik kampung/Lembu kobou dan kambing semuo/Takdo siapa nak jago  
Tanah pun banyak terbiar/Somak samun berekar ekar/Kelapo gugur tak siapa peduli/Pokok sagu gobah sendiri  
Takdo siapa yang ado di kampung/Kebanyakan orang tuo/Orang bujang dan anak daro/Semua mengantau belako  
Orang lelaki yang mano ado/Semua dah pencen belako/Apa nak dibuek eh lagi/Hanyo beborak di kodai kupi  
Pulanglah orang mudo/Pado mengantau tak tentu halo/Tanah yang somak kito torangkan/Tidak tidak eh bolih tanam kacang  
Surau kosong kito ponohkan/Kadang magrib pak imam sorang/Yang ado pun tak dapek den kato/Main dam sampai ke sonjo  
Pulanglah orang mudo.*

a fundamental question about the future relationship between the Malays of Negeri Sembilan and their villages. Many of the urban dwellers of Negeri Sembilan origin, whether living inside or outside the state, now marry across the village boundaries and state boundaries.<sup>33)</sup> Yet they still do frequently go home to visit their parents in the village. But I wonder how many of them will continue to return after their parents have died. Often there is nobody to take care of a house or houseyard after the occupants have died, and the house eventually collapses and the houseyard becomes overgrown with bushes. Then the urban residents will have no place to stay should they wish to visit their “native” village.

Being an urbanite myself, I tend to entertain romantic sentiments about the village scene with its green carpet of growing rice plants. It is evidently an image shared by some of the old folks in the village. Let me quote a passage from my conversation with an old woman in Negeri Sembilan some time ago:

One day a few years ago I was having afternoon tea with an old woman in a village near Sri Menanti. We were talking about her childhood memories. At one point she told me with feeling: “When I was a little girl, this whole valley used to be so beautiful during the planting season. It was all green as far as the eye could see. Then as the harvesting season approached, the colour turned to yellow. . . . We had such a good view of the entire valley in the clear night of the bright moon, for the rice fields and surrounding areas were kept neat and tidy. We could even see the lights of Sri Menanti in the distance, which was more than one *batu* (one mile) from-here.” [Kato 1988: 109]

The village then was a “home” where people were born, married, raised children, worked and died.

Instead of green rice fields, one now sees many uncultivated rice fields in Inas, as in most other villages in Negeri Sembilan. In the village near Sri Menanti. . . , the old woman can no longer see the lights of Sri Menanti even on a clear night, because her view of the valley is now blocked by shrubs and thickets growing in and around the unattended rice fields. [*ibid.* : 130]

Nowadays the village is less of a “home,” having increasingly fewer young faces at school and fewer peasants in the field. In some ways it is more like a suburb than an agricultural community of bygone days. Houses and houseyards are kept meticulously clean and tidy; and there are very few agricultural activities observable. I wonder if the young Malays of Negeri Sembilan will be able to develop and cherish any more emotional attachment to such a village than they have to suburbia.

The rise of abandoned paddy fields raises a fundamental question about the nature of the Malay kampong in Negeri Sembilan and its relationship with the identity of Negeri Sembilan Malays. It is possible that one of the objectives of the New Economic Policy, that is, to urbanize the predominantly rural and thus presumably poor Malay population, might have worked only too well in Negeri

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33) Concerning changing marriage patterns among Malays of Negeri Sembilan, see Kato [1994].

Sembilan. As abandoned paddy fields, de-agriculturalization, and de-kampong-ization make further strides, it is possible that such factors as urban middle-class life-style and Islam and, to a certain extent, an idealized or ideologized vision of Adat Perpatih will become important in sustaining the identity of young Malays of Negeri Sembilan origin in the future.

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NS AR: Negri Sembilan Administration Report

AR KP: Annual Report Kuala Pilah

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